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ABSTRACT

Recent research has documented an increasing rate of smoking among today's college students. Despite the increased use of cigarettes among students, there is evidence to suggest that anti-smoking norms still predominate among both students and faculty. This study compared attitudes toward hypothetical students who smoked cigarettes and those who did not. In addition, the impact of smoking restrictions on the smoking behaviors and feelings of the smokers were evaluated. Prevention of smoking during work and leisure experiences in smoke-free environments may increase the desire to smoke among some individuals. The prevalence of this counter-productive effect was assessed through administration of a survey to undergraduate psychology students (N=74). Results show that the perceptions of smokers are generally more negative than those of nonsmokers. Nonsmokers were nearly twice as likely to be seen as intelligent and sophisticated as smokers. While only two-thirds of the students viewed smokers as considerate, physically fit, and mature, most saw these positive traits as descriptive of nonsmokers. The majority of the smokers seem to be responsive to others' negative attitudes toward smoking. (Contains 15 references.) (MKA)

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Educational Discrimination Against Smokers:

Evidence of Student and Faculty Prejudice

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Abstract

Recent research has documented an increasing rate of smoking among today's college students. Despite the increased use of cigarettes among students, there is evidence to suggest that anti-smoking norms still predominate among both students and faculty. This study compared attitudes toward hypothetical students who smoked cigarettes and those who did not. In addition, the impact of smoking restrictions on the smoking behaviors and feelings of smokers was evaluated. Prevention of smoking during work and leisure experiences in smoke-free environments may increase the desire to smoke among some individuals. The prevalence of this counter-productive effect was assessed through administration of a survey to undergraduate psychology students.

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Introduction

Overall, cigarette smoking in the United States is on the decline (Wechsler, et.al.,1998). There are a number of possible reasons for the drop in smoking prevalence. The dangers of cigarette smoke are widely known and accepted. Children are inundated with antismoking commercials and educational programs designed to prevent cigarette smoking. There are also large numbers of smoking cessation programs and countless anti tobacco campaigns aimed at adults. Nicotine addiction is better understood and pharmaceuticals have been developed to curb nicotine withdrawal. Restrictive smoking policies are widespread and increasing. Job sites, restaurants, shopping malls, movie theaters and airline flights are only a few examples of public places that have initiated no-smoking policies. The hospital industry has enacted a nationwide ban on smoking (Longo, et. al., 1996).

Smoking restrictions have been associated with lower smoking prevalence, higher lifetime quit rates, more recent quit attempts and lower daily cigarette consumption (Jeffrey, et.al, 1994; Brenner, et.al., 1997). One study found that a hospital smoking ban resulted in a decrease in cigarette consumption by an average of four cigarettes a day (Brigham, et.al., 1994). The same study reported that restricted smokers did not appear to smoke more cigarettes during non-work hours in an attempt to compensate for cigarettes not smoked at work (Brigham, et.al., 1994). Nonsmokers benefit from this restriction because they are no longer subjected to second-hand smoke. The resulting benefits of smoking restrictions for both smokers and nonsmokers are promising, and most research supports the widespread implementation of these policies. It has also been shown that smokers and nonsmokers generally favor restrictive smoking policies in public places and usually abide by them. Studies have reported that between 90% and 95% of smokers and nonsmokers agree with restrictive smoking policies (Ashley, 1996; Brenner, et.al., 1997).

However, no-smoking policies at work may place a heavy burden on a small group of heavily addicted smokers. Borland and Owen conducted a study concerning perceived need to smoke during smoking restricted work hours. Nine percent of smokers reported a strong need to smoke at work and 26% reported a mild need (Borland & Owen, 1995). Workplace smoking bans have also been associated with increased ratings of common withdrawal symptoms (cravings/urges and concentration difficulties) among smokers during work hours (Brigham, et.al., 1994). Depending upon the severity of these symptoms, they may lead to a decrease in worker productivity.

Those people who do smoke often encounter negative social reactions. Research has shown that nonsmokers tend to attribute negative characteristics to smokers. Nonsmokers perceive smokers less favorably than other nonsmokers on a number of characteristics, including intelligence, sophistication, consideration, health and maturity (Gibson, 1997). This negative stereotype was found for almost all personality characteristics investigated. This bias has led many smokers to hide their habit in order to avoid these negative reactions.

Despite all of this, evidence suggests that the prevalence of cigarette smoking is actually rising among college students (Wechsler, et.al., 1998). Between 1993 and 1997, the prevalence of cigarette smoking among college students rose by 27.8%, from 22.3% to 28.5% (Wechsler, et.al., 1998). This statistic is alarming because it may reverse the

current decline in adult smoking prevalence. In an attempt to combat this increase in college smoking, many colleges are now prohibiting smoking in all dorms and apartments (Davis, 1999).

The present study was conducted in an attempt to uncover college students' psychological reactions to smoking restrictions, revolving around a possible perceived threat to their freedom. It also addressed the negative stereotypes associated with smokers. A survey was distributed to an Introductory Psychology class, addressing students' perceived attributes of smokers and nonsmokers in an attempt to uncover differences and stereotypes. Smokers were then questioned about their reactions to smoking restrictions.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted in an introductory psychology course at a small liberal arts college located in southeastern Pennsylvania. Seventy-four students participated, including 39 females and 31 males. Seven of the participants were smokers. This was determined by a "yes" response to the question "Do you currently smoke cigarettes." The remaining participants were nonsmokers. Their ages ranged from 18 to 20 years. All major areas of study were represented.

Apparatus

The experimenters devised a 67-item 4-point Likert-type questionnaire divided into two sections. The first section, completed by all participants, consisted of forty-two items designed to measure participants' perceptions of smokers. The second section, completed only by smokers, consisted of 25 items measuring smokers' attitudes towards and behavioral effects of smoking restrictions.

Procedure

The study was conducted prior to an introductory psychology course class period located in an auditorium setting. The questionnaire was distributed and collected by the researchers. The professor instructed the participants to complete the survey and advised them that they would receive class credit upon completion. No time restrictions were indicated.

Results

The data indicated that nonsmokers viewed fellow nonsmokers as often or very frequently appearing intelligent (91%) while only 50.7% of the nonsmokers perceived smokers as being intelligent. Seventy eight percent of nonsmokers perceived other nonsmokers as sophisticated while only 37.4% of nonsmokers observed smokers as sophisticated. Ninety one percent of nonsmokers thought that other nonsmokers were considerate while 65.6% of nonsmokers viewed smokers as considerate. Nonsmokers also perceived smokers as less fit than nonsmokers (92.6% versus 64.2%). Almost all (96%) of nonsmokers saw other nonsmokers as being mature, while only 67% of them perceived smokers as being mature.

Of the participants who were smokers, 71% try to conceal their habit from parents, faculty, staff, and others. However, no smokers reported only smoking in the

presence of other smokers. Seventy one percent of smokers say they never avoid situations because smoking is prohibited within them. Fifty seven percent of smokers reported that they do favor smoking restrictions, but 71% smoke wherever and whenever it is permitted.

The majority (57%) of the smokers sampled did not smoke within 30 minutes of waking. However, 86% of them felt they were addicted to nicotine. Seventy one percent consistently reported finding smoking more satisfying after a period of restriction, however only 43% found smoking more relaxing after abstinence.

A majority of smokers (71.5%) did not experience an enhanced sense of freedom after leaving a smoke-free situation. They also did not feel constrained while in a smoke-free situation. Among smokers, 71.4% never or rarely craved cigarettes in a smoke-free situation. All smokers were at least sometimes less interested in smoking while in a smoke-free situation.

Discussion

The findings of this study corroborate those of other researchers who have found that perceptions of smokers are generally more negative than those of nonsmokers. Nonsmokers were nearly twice as likely to be seen as intelligent and sophisticated as smokers. While only two-thirds of students viewed smokers as considerate, physically fit, and mature, most (over 90%) saw these positive traits as descriptive of nonsmokers.

The majority of the smokers surveyed seemed responsive to others' negative attitudes towards smoking. Most concealed their smoking from their parents, although few went to the extreme of avoiding smoking in front of all nonsmokers. Most of these smokers supported restrictions on their smoking, and acknowledged that they tend to smoke whenever free to do so.

Most members of this sample of smokers see themselves as addicted, although only about a half engage in the "first thing in the day" smoking expected among those with strong addiction to nicotine. After periods of forced abstinence within smoking-restricted settings, the majority of smokers report chain smoking multiple cigarettes, and said they found cigarettes more satisfying (although not necessarily more relaxing). This supports the notion that for college students, smoking restrictions may enhance the appeal of cigarettes and lead to increased usage.

On the other hand, few smokers reported craving cigarettes while in smoking restricted settings. In fact, most experienced reduced interest in smoking while in these situations. These smokers did not seem to feel "liberated" upon leaving a restricted setting, so any apparent rebound elevation in smoking does not seem to be attributable to reactance or resentment toward smoke-free policies.

The small sample of smokers in this study severely limits the ability to generalize from these findings. On the other hand, this pilot study suggests the need for additional research examining ways in which college students may react to smoking restrictions differently from older adults. If compensatory increased smoking after abstinence is more of a risk with this age group, measures to reduce this problem may be worthwhile. The current findings suggest that while smoking restrictions may temporarily elevate the attractiveness of cigarettes and elicit increased smoking, they do not necessarily foster preoccupation with cigarettes, even among students who see themselves as addicted to nicotine.

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